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Race-Based Sexual Preferences in a Sample of Online Profiles of Urban Men Seeking Sex with Men

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ABSTRACT *Race-based sexual preferences in the online profiles of men who have sex with men (MSM) may be relevant for understanding the sexual health of this population, including racial/ethnic disparities in HIV infection. In October 2011, a content analysis was conducted of the profiles of Boston-area members of a racially diverse website for MSM. The present analysis formatively examined the use of demographic and partner selection criteria by race/ethnicity appearing in the profiles of men who indicated race-based partner preferences (n = 89). Latino men were the most frequently preferred race (54 %), followed by White (52 %), Black (48 %), and Asian (12 %) men. In separate multivariable models adjusted for age and HIV status disclosure, wanting low-risk foreplay was associated with a preference for White men (aOR) = 4.27; 95 % CI = 1.70–10.75; p = 0.002), while wanting group sex was associated with a preference for Black (OR = 2.28; 95 % CI = 1.08–4.81; p = 0.03) and Latino men (OR = 2.56; 95 % CI = 1.25–5.23; p = 0.01). Future studies are needed to replicate findings in larger online samples. Mixed-methods research should explore how racial and behavioral preferences impact the sexual mixing patterns and health of MSM online in urban areas.*

KEYWORDS *MSM, Internet, Race/ethnicity, HIV, Sexual risk*

INTRODUCTION

Men who have sex with men (MSM) represent just 2 % of the US male population,[1] yet comprised the majority (62 %) of all new HIV infections diagnosed among adults and adolescents in 2011.[2] MSM of color are among the most severely affected by the epidemic as Black MSM constituted 72 % of new HIV infections among all Black men in 2010,[3] and 38 % among all MSM in 2011,[2] while Latino MSM accounted for 79 % of new HIV infections among all Latino men in 2010,[4] and 24 % among MSM in 2011.[2]

MSM of color often experience racial discrimination when seeking sexual partners, which has been shown to contribute to HIV risk.[5–10] Moreover, qualitative studies highlight a racialized sexual hierarchy in which White men are considered to be the most favored sexual partners and men of color are preferred least.[5,11–15] For men of color, social stratification in the form of a racialized hierarchy has been

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shown to lead to restricted sexual networks,[11,13,16] a diminished sense of self-worth,[5,11–13,15] and increased vulnerability to HIV sexual risk behavior.[5,11,13,15]

The Internet is one of the most popular venues for sexual partner seeking among MSM.[17,18] On the Internet, the "racialized sexual marketplace" is highly palpable as specific aspects of the online experience can amplify its existence.[11,13,15] Specifically, sexual partner seeking on the Internet encourages the use of partner selection criteria in the profiles of men using the Internet to seek sex and these specifications often include the preferred race of a partner as well as desired sexual practices.[11–13,15] Though asserting a preference for particular types of sexual partners may be liberating for men, the use of race-based partner selection criteria in online settings may reinforce the racial hierarchy and stigmatize certain groups based on racial stereotypes. Specifically, research shows that MSM may internalize the racial stereotypes and socialization messages observed in the online environment, which may, in turn, influence sexual risk behavior.[5,11,15] Thus, understanding the relationship between racial and sexual preferences in the online environments where men seek sex with other men is important to understanding the social and cultural contexts that may shape sexual risk behaviors among MSM of color and their partners. This formative study sought to examine the factors associated with citing a racial preference in the online profiles of Black, White, Latino, and Asian men seeking sex with other men.

METHODS

In October 2011, data were collected from the online profiles of members of a popular, racially diverse sexual "hook-up" website for MSM. A non-intrusive content analysis methodology[12,14,19–23] was used on a website that was free and easily accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Open and closed methods[24] were used to code specific demographic, sexual, and racialized content appearing in the profiles sampled. Profiles were eligible for inclusion in this analysis if they were: (1) male, (2) located in the Boston-area, (3) Black, White, Latino, or Asian/Pacific Islander; and (4) indicated a race-based partner preference; yielding a final analytic sample of 89 member profiles. The study was approved and conducted through the Institutional Review Board of Fenway Health in Boston.[25]

Measures

Member profiles were coded using both pre-existing response options (i.e., checkboxes provided by site when creating profile) and open-ended responses that were grouped according to themes derived from previous research.[13,22] All demographic variables were categorical and included age, race/ethnicity (White, Black, Latino, Asian), self-reported HIV status, disclosure of sexual identity (e.g., "out," "not out"), and sexual position (e.g., "top"—insertive partner, "bottom"—receptive partner, versatile).[13,22] Drug and alcohol use variables were dichotomously assessed (e.g., openly reported any use of alcohol/drugs yes/no). Relationship preferences were coded as separate dichotomous variables (e.g., reported looking for sex yes/no; friendship yes/no). Both sexual and race-based partner preferences were dichotomously assessed as having reported the preference or its absence.

Data Analysis

SAS version 9.2 statistical software was used to perform analyses.[26] Descriptive statistics were obtained for all variables. Bivariate logistic regression analyses were estimated for sexual partnering preferences, covariates, and citing an explicit

TABLE 1 Profile characteristics by race/ethnicity of Boston-area men seeking men on a gay/bisexual social networking site ($n=89$)

	White ($n=19$)	Black ($n=21$)	Asian ($n=7$)	Latino ($n=42$)	Total ($n=89$)
Demographics	% (n/N)				
Age					
18–25	16 (3/19)	33 (7/21)	43 (3/7)	17 (7/42)	23 (20/89)
26–35	21 (4/19)	33 (7/21)	43 (3/7)	55 (23/42)	42 (37/89)
36–50	47 (9/19)	33 (7/21)	14 (1/7)	29 (12/42)	33 (29/89)
>50	16 (3/19)	0 (0/21)	0 (1/7)	0 (0/42)	3 (3/89)
HIV status					
Negative	68 (13/19)	86 (18/21)	57 (4/7)	88 (37/42)	81 (72/89)
Positive	5 (1/19)	0 (0/0)	14 (1/7)	2 (1/42)	3 (3/89)
Not reported	26 (5/19)	14 (3/21)	29 (2/7)	10 (4/42)	16 (14/89)
Sexual identity disclosure					
Out	58 (11/19)	29 (6/21)	57 (4/7)	64 (27/42)	54 (48/89)
Not out, discreet, down-low	5 (1/19)	48 (10/21)	29 (2/7)	19 (8/42)	25 (22/89)
Did not report	37 (7/19)	24 (5/21)	14 (1/7)	17 (7/42)	21 (19/89)
Sexual position					
Top	11 (2/19)	19 (4/21)	14 (1/7)	12 (5/42)	13 (12/89)
Versatile	47 (9/19)	63 (12/19)	42 (3/7)	48 (20/42)	49 (44/89)
Bottom	11 (2/19)	11 (2/19)	29 (2/7)	29 (12/42)	20 (18/89)
Did not report	32 (6/19)	14 (3/21)	14 (1/7)	12 (5/42)	17 (15/89)
Substance use					
Uses alcohol	68 (13/19)	81 (17/21)	43 (3/7)	86 (36/42)	78 (69/89)
Relationship preferences*					
Sex	90 (17/19)	81 (17/21)	86 (6/7)	91 (38/42)	88 (78/89)
Relationship	53 (10/19)	91 (19/21)	57 (4/7)	60 (25/42)	65 (58/89)
Friendship	74 (14/19)	48 (10/21)	29 (2/7)	79 (33/42)	66 (59/89)
Sexual partnering preferences					
Low-risk foreplay[a,b]	5 (1/19)	10 (2/21)	14 (1/7)	19 (8/42)	14 (12/89)
Rough sex[a]	5 (1/19)	33 (7/21)	29 (2/7)	14 (6/42)	18 (16/89)
Group sex	53 (10/19)	52 (11/21)	43 (3/7)	69 (29/42)	60 (53/89)

*Proportions add to more than 100 % in several categories because they are not mutually exclusive and/or due to rounding

[a]Not a response option; variable generated based on profile content

[b]Low-risk foreplay includes foreplay activities that are low risk for the transmission/acquisition of HIV including water sports (urinating), scat play (feces play), and rimming (oral anal sex)

preference for a partner of specific race, separately for each, compared to lack of preference (i.e., preference for White men, preference for Black men, and preference for Latino men). Preference for Asian men was excluded as an outcome due to low-cell count. Variables with a p value of <0.05 in the bivariate comparisons were retained in the multivariable models.[27] Bivariate and adjusted odds ratios (OR/aOR) and 95 % confidence intervals (95 % CI) are presented.

RESULTS

Participant demographics and relationship and sexual partnering preferences by race/ethnicity appear in Table 1 ($n=89$). As shown in Table 2, and depicted graphically in Fig. 1, among those endorsing one or more race-based preference,

TABLE 2 Race-based preferences ($n=89$) by race/ethnicity as reported in the profiles of Boston-area men seeking men on a gay/bisexual social networking site

	White $n=19$	Black $n=21$	Asian $n=7$	Latino $n=42$	Total $n=89$
	% (n/N)				
White racial preference					
Yes, indicated	47 (9/19)	19 (4/21)	57 (4/7)	62 (26/42)	52 (46/89)
Black racial preference					
Yes, indicated	53 (10/19)	76 (16/21)	14 (1/7)	38 (16/42)	48 (43/89)
Asian racial preference					
Yes, indicated	21 (4/19)	5 (1/21)	43 (3/7)	7 (3/42)	12 (11/89)
Latino racial preference					
Yes, indicated	63 (12/19)	43 (9/21)	14 (1/7)	62 (26/42)	54 (48/89)

% = n/total number of people who specified any race-based preference or rejection

Latino (54 %), White (52 %), and Black (48 %) men were the mostly highly preferred, while Asian men were preferred least (12 %). Black men tended to prefer other Black men (76 %), while Latino men equally preferred White (62 %) or other Latino men (62 %). The majority of White men reported a preference for Latino (63 %) or Black (53 %) partners, while Asian men most frequently reported a preference for White partners (57 %). Latino men most often reported a race-based preference compared to all other races (ORs: ranged from 2.2–4.2; all $p<0.01$).

In three separate multivariable models, each adjusted for age and HIV status disclosure (Table 3), (1) preference for a White partner was associated with a preference for low-risk foreplay (aOR=4.27; 95 % CI=1.70–10.75; $p=0.002$); (2) factors significantly associated with a preference for a Black partner included self-identifying as a "bottom" (aOR=2.30; 95 % CI=1.07–4.96; $p=0.04$) and a preference for group sex (aOR=2.28; 95 % CI=1.08–4.81; $p=0.03$); and (3) factors significantly associated with a preference for a Latino partner included self-identifying as a "bottom" (aOR=2.27; 95 % CI=1.07–4.81; $p=0.03$) and preference for group sex (aOR=2.56; 95 % CI=1.25–5.23; $p=0.01$).

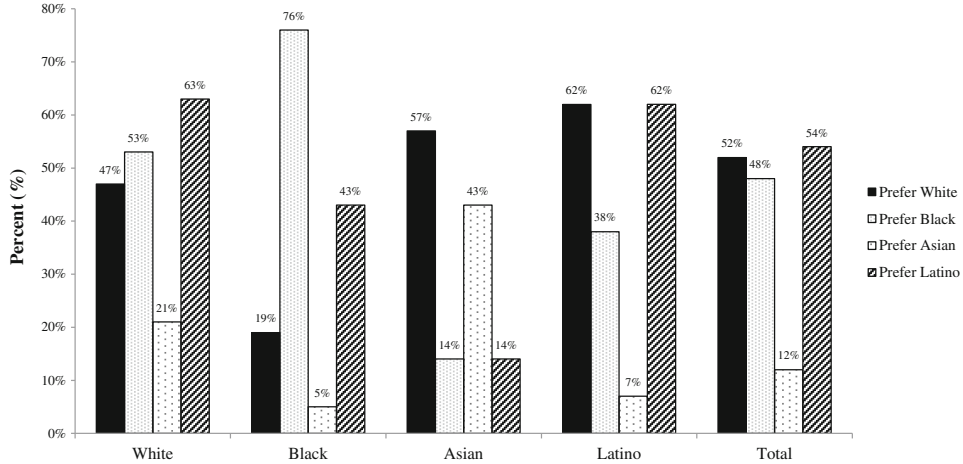

FIGURE 1 Race-based preferences ($n=89$) by race/ethnicity as reported in the profiles of Boston-area men seeking men on a gay/bisexual social networking site.

TABLE 3 Multivariable adjusted logistic regression models examining the association of substance use and sexual partnering preferences and racial preferences appearing in the profiles of Boston-area men seeking men on a gay/bisexual social networking site ($n=89$)

	Prefer White men ($n=43$)				Prefer Black men ($n=43$)				Prefer Latino men ($n=48$)			
	OR (95 % CI)	*p* Value	aOR (95 % CI)	*p* Value	OR (95 % CI)	*p* Value	aOR (95 % CI)	*p* Value	OR (95 % CI)	*p* Value	aOR (95 % CI)	*p* Value
Sexual position												
Versatile	1.00	–	–	–	1.00	–	1.00	–	1.00	–	1.00	–
Top	1.25 (0.55–2.88)	0.60	–	–	0.30 (0.07–1.30)	0.11	0.27 (0.06–1.18)	0.08	0.93 (0.37–2.34)	0.87	0.95 (0.37, 2.46)	0.92
Bottom	1.27 (0.53–3.04)	0.60	–	–	2.25 (1.08–4.69)	***0.03***	2.30 (1.07–4.96)	**0.04**	2.46 (1.20–5.04)	***0.01***	2.27 (1.07, 4.81)	***0.03***
Substance use												
Alcohol use	2.40 (1.10–5.21)	***0.03***	1.35 (0.54–3.35)	0.52	1.79 (0.88–3.68)	0.11	–	–	2.38 (1.14–4.96)	***0.02***	1.98 (0.75, 5.23)	0.17
Sexual preferences												
Low-risk foreplay	5.86 (2.45–14.02)	<***0.0001***	4.27 (1.70–10.75)	***0.002***	3.76 (1.41–10.17)	***0.01***	1.27 (0.38–4.25)	0.70	5.13 (2.16–12.17)	***0.0002***	2.11 (0.74, 5.23)	0.16
Group sex	2.20 (1.19–4.08)	***0.01***	1.83 (0.91–3.69)	0.09	3.33 (1.74–6.37)	***0.0003***	2.28 (1.08–4.81)	***0.03***	3.95 (2.10–7.44)	***0.0001***	2.56 (1.25, 5.23)	***0.01***
Rough sex	1.49 (0.57–3.88)	0.41	–	–	3.64 (1.74–7.62)	***0.001***	2.25 (0.92–5.47)	0.08	3.60 (1.78–7.29)	***0.0004***	1.91 (0.83, 4.37)	0.13

Due to low-cell counts, associations between demographic and sexual risk preferences, and preference for an Asian partner could not be explored

aOR adjusted odds ratio. Adjusted for age and HIV status disclosure

DISCUSSION

Researchers have argued that the use of race in partner selection criteria has implications in the creation and reinforcement of racialized sexual norms. Specifically, sexual behaviors may be activated in response to racial stereotypes leading men of color to engage in HIV sexual risk behavior in order to meet the racialized sexual expectations of partners who rank higher on the racial hierarchy (e.g., White men).[5,6,13,15] Our formative data lend support to the existence of racialized sexual stereotyping as looking for higher risk sex activities (i.e., group sex) was associated with a preference for Black and Latino men, and endorsing lower risk sex activities (i.e., low-risk foreplay) was associated with a preference for White partners. If behavioral intentions predict behavior as the literature suggests,[28–30] than these findings could pose elevated risk for HIV among Black and Latino MSM seeking sex online.

Consistent with prior research,[16] Black men significantly preferred other Black men (76 % preferred sex partners of the same race). While same race preferences could indicate more restricted sexual networks,[13,14,16] our findings were unique[16] in that Black men were not the least preferred partners of all other races. Rather, Black men were among the most highly preferred partners of Latino and White men. Asian men, however, were the least preferred race overall and among White, Black, and Latino men, specifically. This is particularly troublesome given that Asian men in our sample most frequently cited a preference for White men (57 %), yet only one-fifth of White men indicated a preference for Asian men, which is consistent with prior research.[5,6] Qualitative research is needed to understand the differences in preferences by race/ethnicity among men using the Internet to seek sex with men.

There were limitations to the present study. First, this was a formative study that included a small sample of online MSM profiles with race-based preferences; replication of findings is needed with larger study samples. Second, this study analyzed Boston-area members of a specific partner-seeking website; thus, findings may not be generalizable to MSM outside of Boston or on another website. Another limitation is the exclusion of men who reported a race/ethnicity other than those reported here. Additionally, social desirability may have contributed to the under-reporting of preferences perceived as taboo or stigmatized (i.e., race/ethnicity and sexual risk), although social desirability is likely less of a factor in online settings where the potential for anonymity offers some protection against fear of judgment. Finally, as a content analysis of online profiles, this research is unable to assess the extent to which the preferences endorsed in men's profiles actually represent the behaviors practiced in person.

This is the first study we are aware of to document the associations between racial/ethnic and sexual preferences appearing in the online profiles of men seeking sex with other men online. Findings point to the need for interventions that aim to improve the online experience of racial minority men seeking sex with other men on the Internet. Such tactics might include the development of partner-seeking websites which provide safe and supportive environments for men seeking partners of a specific race, or more feasibly, the creation of educational campaigns featuring images of men of diverse races that aim to normalize inter-racial coupling, reduce racialized stereotypes, and promote safer sex practices. Before such interventions can be developed, however, future mixed methods research is needed to better understand how sexual and racialized content appearing in the online profiles of MSM impact those who view it; whether cited preferences contribute to the normalization of sexual risk behaviors among specific races/ethnicities; and lastly, the extent to which racial and sexual preferences predict behavior in offline settings.

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